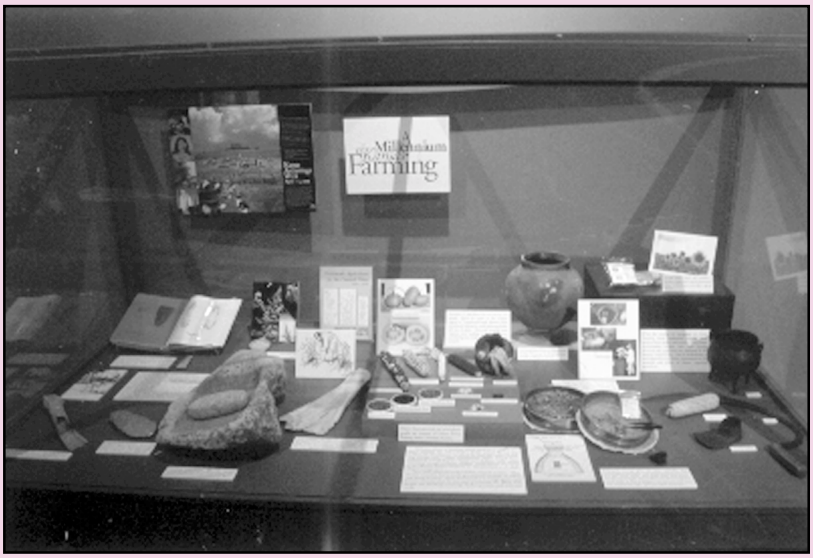
Spotlight on a Millennium of Kansas Farming



"A Millenium of Kansas Farming" was the Spotlight Case exhibit at the Kansas Museum of History in March and April 2001.

"A Millennium of Kansas Farming," an exhibit in the Kansas Museum of History reflects the theme of this year's Kansas Archeology Week poster. The exhibit runs through April and is located in the Spotlight Case, which gives Society departments a chance to highlight items from their collections that are not usually displayed. This year artifacts, graphics, and publications were selected that illustrate Kansas' long agricultural history. Italicized text is quoted from exhibit material.

Native peoples first gathered wild plants, often making the rounds of the same general area each season to harvest the foods available at that time. They used leaves, blossoms, stems, roots, tubers, fruits, and especially vitamin-rich seeds. People eventually began to save and plant seeds. Plants such as goosefoot or lamb's quarters, pigweed, marsh elder, maygrass, knotweed, and little barley that today are considered weeds were grown as food in prehistoric times as much as 2,000 years ago. In fact, these plants were widely cultivated in the Midwest and Central Plains long before the introduction of corn in the region.

Items chosen to represent this time of incipient horticulture are seeds of goosefoot or lamb's quarters (*Chenopodium* sp.), a chipped stone knife with silica polish on its edges that may have been used for harvesting grasses, a digging stick tip made from bison bone that served as a planting tool, a chipped stone hoe with high polish from use, and a metate and mano that were used to grind seeds to make pastes and flours.

Around A.D. 200 plants like corn, beans, and squash, which are native to the tropical regions of Central and South America, were introduced, and native weedy plants gradually fell out of favor. The new tropical crops required more tending to survive, but they provided greater yields and so became widely adopted.

A bison shoulder blade hoe, used to cultivate fields and dig food storage pits, was selected from the archeology collections to depict the intensification of horticulture. In addition, the archeology staff called upon Dianna Henry of Courtland, Kansas, who for many years has preserved and propagated authentic Native American crops. She provided samples of Pawnee blue flour corn, Pawnee Lixokonkatit black eyed flour corn, Pawnee popcorn, Arikara white flour corn, Osage brown flour corn, black Mexican bush bean, Hidatsa red bean, Arikara yellow bush bean, Pawnee orange squash, Arikara squash seeds, Arikara watermelon seeds, and Arikara sunflower seeds.

With the advent of farming, people spent more time in one place, tending the year's crops. If the annual harvest was sufficiently abundant to be stored for later use, native people dug storage pits. These underground "bins" ranged from cylindrical to bell-shaped. Some were shallow, while others were deep enough to require a ladder. Over time, these pits outlived their original purpose. They became unusable due to mold, groundwater seepage, or rodent and insect invasion. Once abandoned as a storage space, a pit became a handy place for the trash of everyday life, filling with hearth and dwelling sweepings, broken pottery, and worn-out tools.

Prehistoric storage pits are time capsules that archeologists can study. Out of the excavated dirt fill of a pit, stone, bone, and antler tools and pottery sherds come to light. Charred kernels of corn and even weed seeds, as fine as pepper, can be recovered from soil samples through a process called "flotation." Turbulent water circulating in flotation barrels brings seeds and other light materials to the surface, where they can be collected and studied. Study of flotation samples has increased our knowledge of the use and distribution of crops in prehistoric times.

An idealized drawing of a storage pit, charred corn cobs, photographs of the flotation process, heavy and light fraction flotation samples, and the laboratory tools for examining them illustrate the archeological techniques discussed.

The production of pottery accompanied the rise of farming. Fired clay pots were used for cooking and storage. With the coming of Europeans to North America, metal implements replaced those made of bone, stone, and pottery. Early Kansas homesteaders brought with them farming practices and crops that they had used in the eastern United States. Not all of these were as well adapted to the Plains environment as the methods and plants of Native American agriculture.

A prehistoric ceramic pot, an iron hoe blade, scythe, iron pot, hybrid yellow dent corn, and modern sunflower cookies demonstrate the continuity of Kansas agriculture from prehistoric times to the present day.

For a calendar of events related to the Kansas Archeology Week season (March-May 2001) check the Society web page: http://www.kshs.org/resource/archeolo.htm.

This article was written by Virginia Wulfkuhle, public archeologist in the Cultural Resources Division.